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THE WICKET-SHAPED OR REVERSED U BRACKET OF NATIVE AMERICAN ROCK ART IN RELATION TO THE NAJA OF THE SQUASH BLOSSOM NECKLACE

In April of 1997 my wife and I hired a Navajo guide, Daniel Staley to take us to the Shaman Site in Tunnel Canyon, located about a half mile up-stream from Cottonwood Canyon in Canyon de Chelly. The site is on private property, so we visited the owner to obtain permission, then in our Toyota 4-Runner we entered into Canyon de Chelly in water a foot to two feet deep, and extending across the entire floor of the canyon. Upon reaching the opening to Tunnel Canyon, we parked on the bank of the river and hiked up the right fork to the Shaman Site.

My goal was to photograph the two figures holding the wicket-like objects, located on the left wall of the overhang above a rather extensive shelter area. The first figure, holding the wicket-shaped object in the right hand, is erect and outlined in white. To the left is a woman

painted in solid white with characteristic pueblo hairstyle. The next figure, farther to the right, is painted with a yellow pigment, but with a white head feather. This figure holds a white wicket-shaped object over the pelvic region of a reclining woman (Figure 1). The female figure is also painted predominately in yellow, but with a deep red band that crosses from shoulder to shoulder. She also has the Pueblo hairstyle, painted white and coiled over the ears. She appears to have a white necklace and loin cloth (Figure 2). Campbell Grant comments on the scene where the wicket-shaped object is held over the woman's pelvic region: "This is a very simple but graphic illustration of what is possibly a shaman exorcising bad spirits that are preventing the woman from having a child" (Grant 1978:185). Grant calls this CDC-25, Shaman Site. What Grant called "a wicket-shaped object" seemed amazingly similar to the female



Figure 1 Shaman Site with figures holding wicket-shaped objects

figure at Nine Mile Canyon in Utah, with a wicket-shaped or reversed U bracket over the pelvic area (Figure 3). Also, at the "Birthing Scene" site in Kane Creek Canyon near Moab, Utah, there is a figure with a similar wicket-shaped or reversed U bracket design in the pelvic area (Figures 4-5).

My thoughts turned to sites in Southern California where the wicket-shape or reversed U bracket stands alone, without a human figure, yet with other associations verifying a fertility concept. At Cow Cove, in the Mojave National Preserve, there is a flat fertility rock with numerous vulva petroglyphs, a bowl shaped design with cross-hatchings that create the diamond power symbols, and four wicket-shaped petroglyphs at the base (Figure 6). Other wicket or reversed U bracket petroglyphs are also found at Cow Cove, but without such obvious fertility associations, except for a panel with three brackets and a vulva symbol (Figure 7). Jesse Earl Warner declares that "Whether represented on the human figure or detached from its source and represented in isolated situations, it still maintains its basic concept of Fertility..." (Warner 1988: Section 6, Page 9).

With these wicket-shaped or reversed U bracket designs in mind, and having just returned from the Shaman Site in Tunnel Canyon, I went into the Canyon de Chelly Visitor's Center. A Navajo woman in a Park Service uniform was standing behind the counter, with a poster of a Native American woman wearing a Squash Blossom Necklace on the wall behind her. Having so recently photographed the figures with the wicket-shaped objects at the Shaman Site, I pointed to the similarly shaped naja on the necklace and asked, "What does that mean?" The Park Service woman, somewhat bemused, answered "Fertility." In fact, wherever I have asked in Native American circles, about the meaning of the naja on the Squash Blossom Necklace, the answer has either been "fertility"

or, expressed in several ways, "a female reproductive symbol" or "emblem of fruitfulness."

Of course, the books about Navajo jewelry insist on the Spanish origins of the Squash Blossom Necklace, and especially the naja. Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh state that it "is an ancient design element. During Roman times, it served as a charm to ward off the evil eye. The crescent eventually was adopted by the Moors of northern Africa and then by the Spanish. They, in turn, brought the naja to Mexico and the Southwest where they used it as an ornament on the headstalls of horse bridles. Early Navajo smiths quickly adopted the attractive crescent" (Turnbaugh and Turnbaugh 1996:79). My own conviction is, however, that regardless of the origins, the rapid growth in the popularity of the design for Navajo silversmiths is accounted for by the recognition of centuries old Native American symbolism in the necklace design.

Lois Essary Jacka (1995) notes that the Squash Blossom Necklace has "a large crescent-shaped pendant in the front center" and comments further that "The most accepted theory about the squash blossom design is that it symbolizes the Mexican pomegranate". She then quotes Woodward, who wrote: "It is my contention that all of these beads were originally Spanish-American trouser and jacket ornaments... (The pomegranate) has been a favorite Spanish decorative motif for centuries... it seems foolish to look further afield for prototypes of this highly popular necklace element. If one were to remove these buttons or cape ornaments and string them, the result would be a fine old Navajo necklace." Jacka then adds: "The ornament was quite possibly misnamed by a trader who thought it resembles a squash blossom" (Jacka 1995:21-22).

Unfortunately, I have not found any studies of the meaning the Navajo silversmiths gave to the symbolism of the Squash Blossom Neck

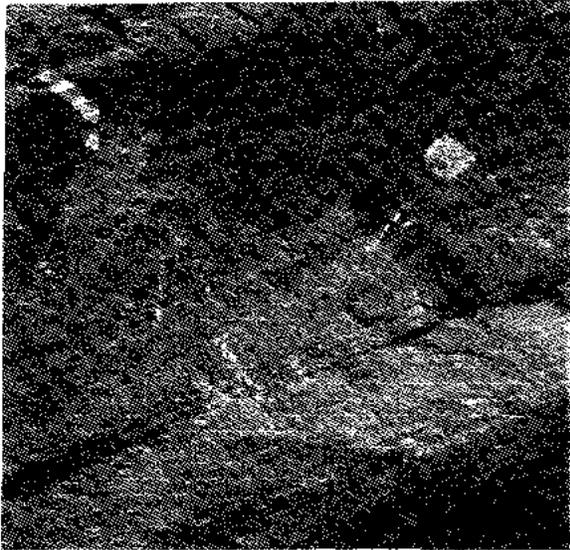


Fig. 2 Canyon de Chelly Shaman Site Fig. 3 Nine Mile U Bracket

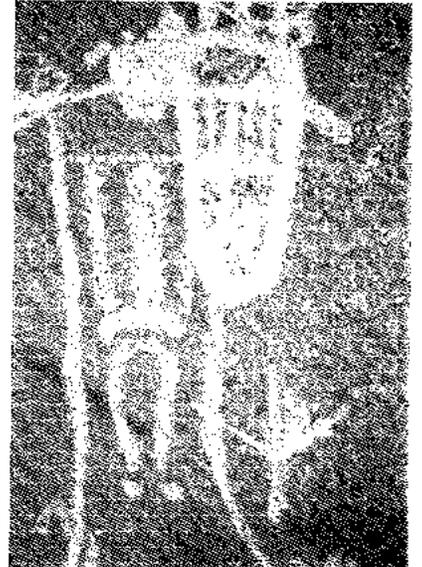


Fig. 4 Kane Creek "Birthing Scene" Fig. 5 Figure with Reversed U



Fig. 6 Cow Cove U Brackets Fig. 7 More Brackets and Vulvas

lace, particularly the naja. As I indicated, the Native Americans I have questioned spoke of the naja as a fertility symbol. Of course, it is not uncommon for persons from one cultural heritage to see an entirely different meaning for symbols from what those of another culture might recognize. Jacka quotes Carl Rosnek, "A great deal of nonsense was written or rumored concerning the 'meaning' of these symbols - when in fact, with few exceptions, they had none for the Indians" (Jacka 1995:25). While this statement was not directed specifically at the Squash Blossom Necklace, I can easily imagine how a Navajo silversmith, knowing full well the fertility or reproductive symbolism his people had given to the naja because of the similarity to age-old traditional symbols, would have replied, "I don't know", if he was pressed to answer to the meaning for a white man with a suspected pornographic mentality, who had demonstrated little respect for cherished Native American culture and symbols.

Warner expresses views similar to my own, when he writes: "Anything to do with the basic U Bracket shape has a fertility connotation." How many know the naja (naha) on the squash blossom necklace is an extended expression of fertility, now a representation of life or 'good luck' (Warner 1988, Section 6, Page 9). While most of Warner's illustrations are from Utah, my intent in this paper will be to show additional illustrations of the wicket-shaped, reversed U bracket symbol in other areas of the Southwest, particularly in Southern California, in petroglyph, pictograph, intaglio and cupule styles. Because this symbol is relatively common, I will focus on examples where there are associations or research suggesting a fertility symbolism for the reversed U bracket or naja-like design.

The most famous fertility site in the Mojave National Preserve is Womb Rock, in the Counsel Rocks complex near Hole-in-the-Wall. The main opening into Womb Rock has a dramatic

vulva petroglyph, among other fertility symbols. The boulder facing Womb Rock, with an overhang, has an encircled cross petroglyph, an emblem of fructification (Patterson 1994: 57 and 197). Under an upper lip of Womb Rock are two of the wicket-shaped or reversed U bracket pictographs, with the lines creating and enclosing the symbols in red pigment. The total conception or birth symbolism of the site, including the vulva and sun pictographs at Shelter Rock (Rafter 1987, 25-30) in the Counsel Rocks area, provides compelling associations to confirm a fertility interpretation for the reversed U or naja-like pictographs (Figure 8).

Another significant Mojave National Preserve site is at Clark Mountain. It is located at the tip of a promontory in a wash east of Pachalco Springs. The cross and vulva symbol, enclosed together with surrounding lines, is an illustration in petroglyph form of the fertility implications of the enclosed cross (Gough 1998: 45-49). Just west of this design and a double enclosed cross, there are vulva symbols and very deeply incised reversed U bracket designs. Here again, the context reinforces the fertility symbolism of these naja-like symbols (Figure 9).

In the Central Mojave Desert, southeast of Barstow, is the well-known Newberry Cave site, most noted for excavations that unearthed many projectile points and other stone artifacts, and of special significance; split-twig figurines, wooden dart shafts, fire drills and textiles. Radiocarbon dating of split-twig figurine fragments and willow dart shaft fragments varied from 880-1620 B.C. to 2120-2480 B.C. (Davis and Smith 1981: 93). Green and white pigments were most commonly used in the cave pictographs, with red and black less frequently used. While the green pictographs have not stood the test of time with distinctness, there is one red reversed U bracket,



Fig. 8 Womb Rock Pictographs

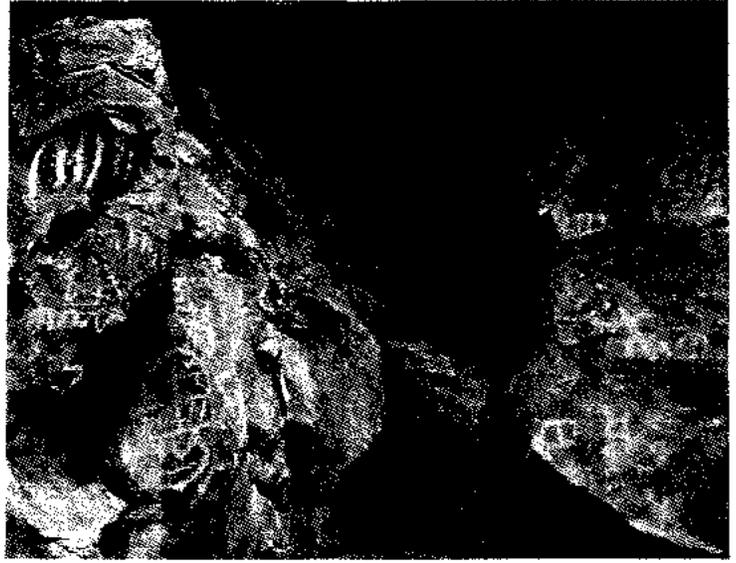


Fig. 9 Pachalco Vulvas and Brackets

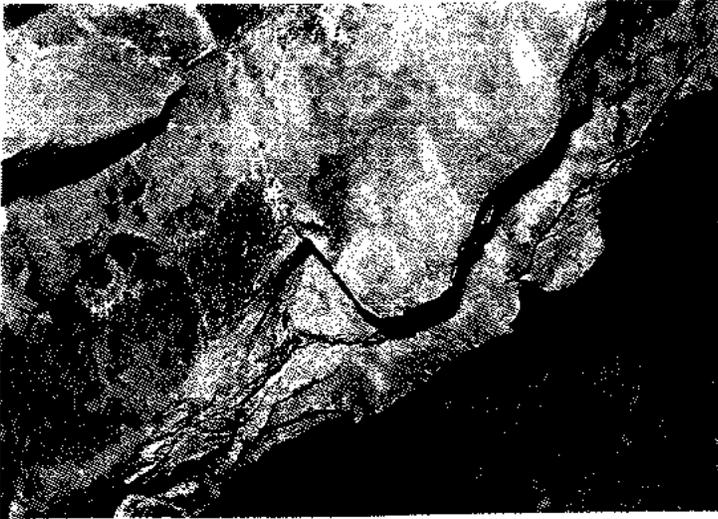


Fig. 10 Newberry Reversed U Brackets

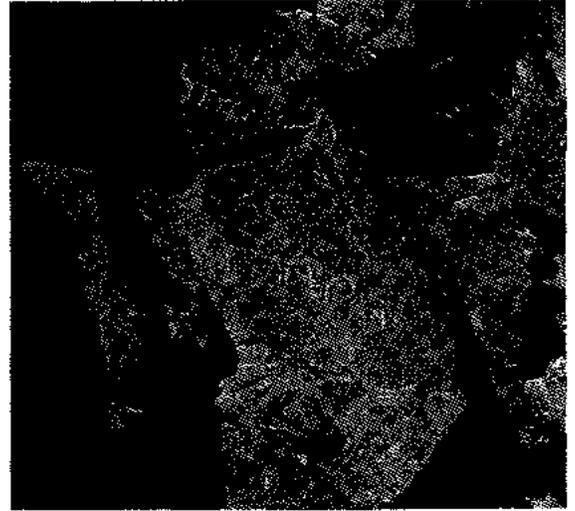


Fig. 11 Inscription Brackets

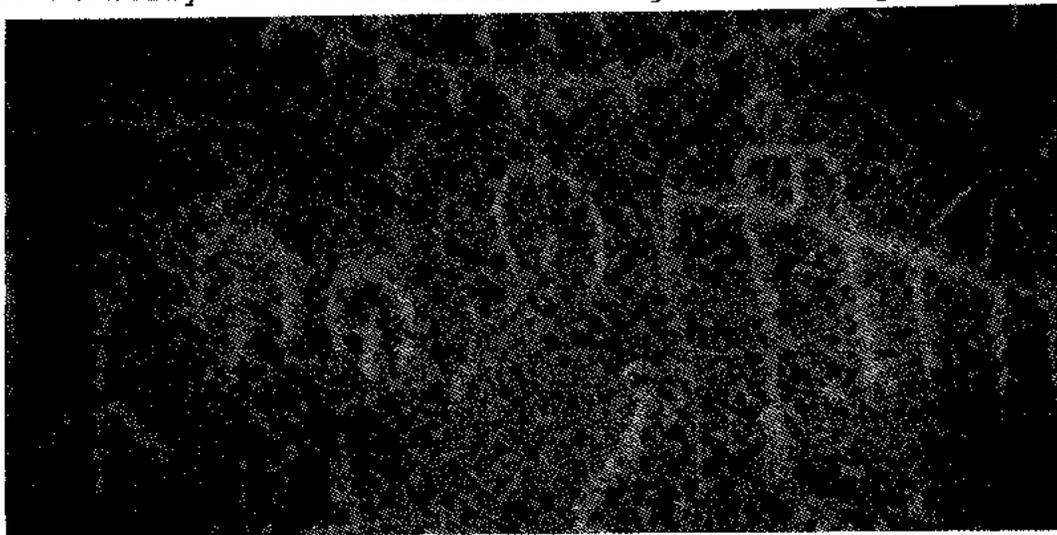


Fig. 12 Chalfant Site with Naja-like Vulva Glyphs - Center Line
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white double line and single line reversed U bracket or wicket-shaped designs, and vulva symbols in white, providing a fertility association (Figure 10). A provocative reference to “a perception of caves as symbolic wombs, i.e., places where increase magic would be especially appropriate”, is referenced by C. Alan Davis and Gerald A. Smith to Levy 1948, 1-42, in their study of *Newberry Cave*, from which the above information on excavated materials is obtained.

In Inscription Canyon, a Central Mojave Desert site located Northwest of Barstow, California there is a wicket-shaped petroglyph located near several of the usual bisected oval vulva symbols (Figure 11). At the Chalfant site north of Bishop, California, one of the most common among many types of vulva symbols is a naja-like reversed U with a center line, often starting from a natural hole in the rock surface. While this design is widespread at the site, the inclusion of this symbol in and beneath the famous “Cosmos” shield panel is particularly suggestive (Figure 12). Vuncannon (1985: 120-126) notes how these “vulva carvings are scattered over the entire cliff”, but are also thickly clustered in “one vulva colony” and in a shelter area. These unique vulva designs seem amazingly like the naja in the Squash Blossom Necklace, with a center pendant within the reversed U shape.

Another variation of the design involves multiple arches or reversed U shapes with the center line. The Dancing Man site, located a few miles southeast of Cane Man Hill below Silver Peak in Esmeralda County, Nevada has a panel with several multiple line arches, wicket or reversed U bracket designs (Figure 13). In addition, at the Dancing Man site there is a single multiple arches or reversed U bracket petroglyph (Figure 14). In Petroglyph Canyon, located in the Dead Mountains parallel to and west of the Colorado River in the Mojave Desert, there is a double lined reversed U bracket (Figure 15), but also a

multiple wickets or arches petroglyph (Figure 16). Petroglyph Canyon has a number of springs or seeps, and was the original path of the Mojave Trail until, to accommodate wagons, the Mojave Road skirted around to the northwest.

In the Old Woman Mountains, southeast of Essex in the Eastern Mojave, petroglyphs are located around the base of the main monolith at the Painted Rock Site. An alcove at the southwest corner of the huge monolith has a petroglyph with three arches or wickets and a central vertical line (Figure 17). (The site is named Painted Rock because of a high cave across from the monolith, which is covered with pictographs.)

Farther south the Mule Mountain Intaglios, located southwest of Blythe, feature eight of the reversed U bracket or naja-like designs, each created with ten cleared circles (Figure 18), which show up clearly in an aerial photo (Figure 19). Two straight double rows of ten circles (Figure 20) and a dancing circle and trails are also included in the site. The probable meaning of the reversed U-bracket design as a female fertility symbol is the subject of this paper. As for the two straight double rows of cleared circles, Vuncannon notes that “rows of parallel notches, and dotted lines” are considered to be male symbols” (Vuncannon: 1985, 122-123).

The final illustrations in this paper are from Porterville Rocky Hill, a site immediately East of Porterville, California. In a small rock shelter, guarded by a large rock covered with cupules, there is a pictograph with arches or reversed U-brackets and a central vertical line (Figure 21). Native American informants in the area have associated cupules with birthing rites (and even more widespread is the practice of calling cupule boulders not only “doctor rocks” and “rain rocks” but also “baby rocks”, with the implication that contact with them

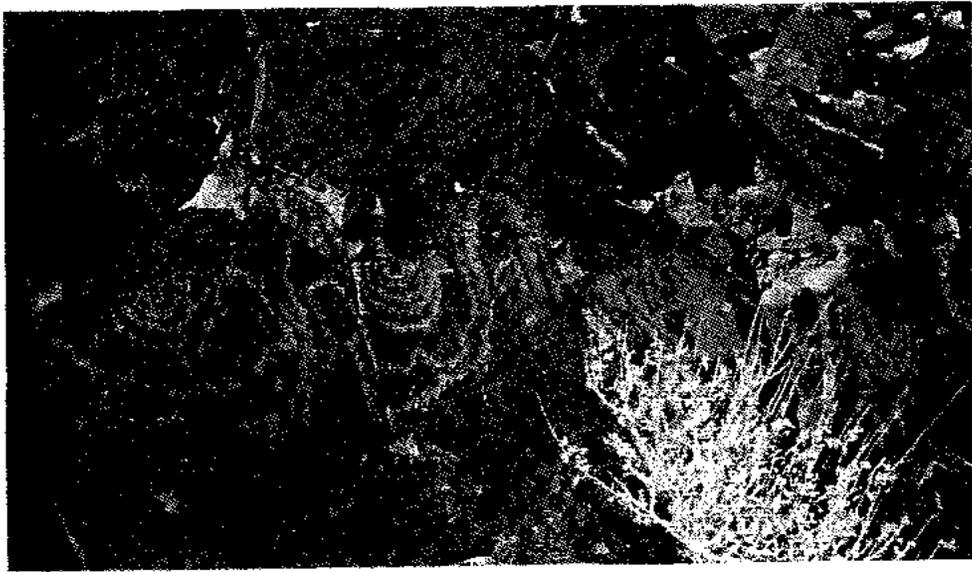


Fig. 13 Nevada "Dancing Man" Site with Multiple Wicket Forms



Fig. 14 Multiple Reversed U Form

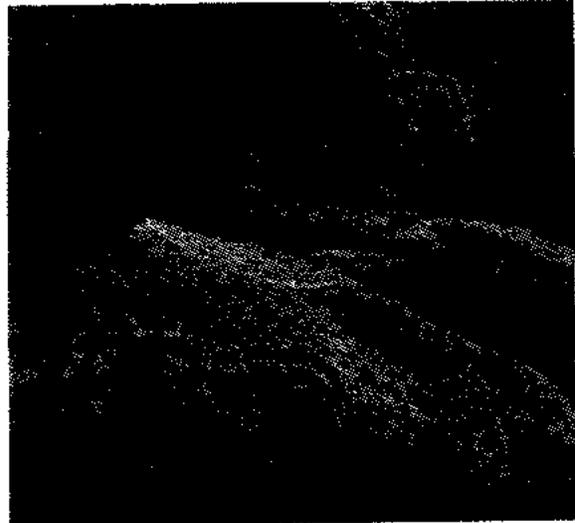


Fig. 15 Dead Mt. Double Wicket



Fig. 16 Dead Mt. Multiple Wicket



Fig. 17 Old Woman Arches & Line



Fig. 18 Mule Mountain Intaglio with Cleared Circles in U Shape

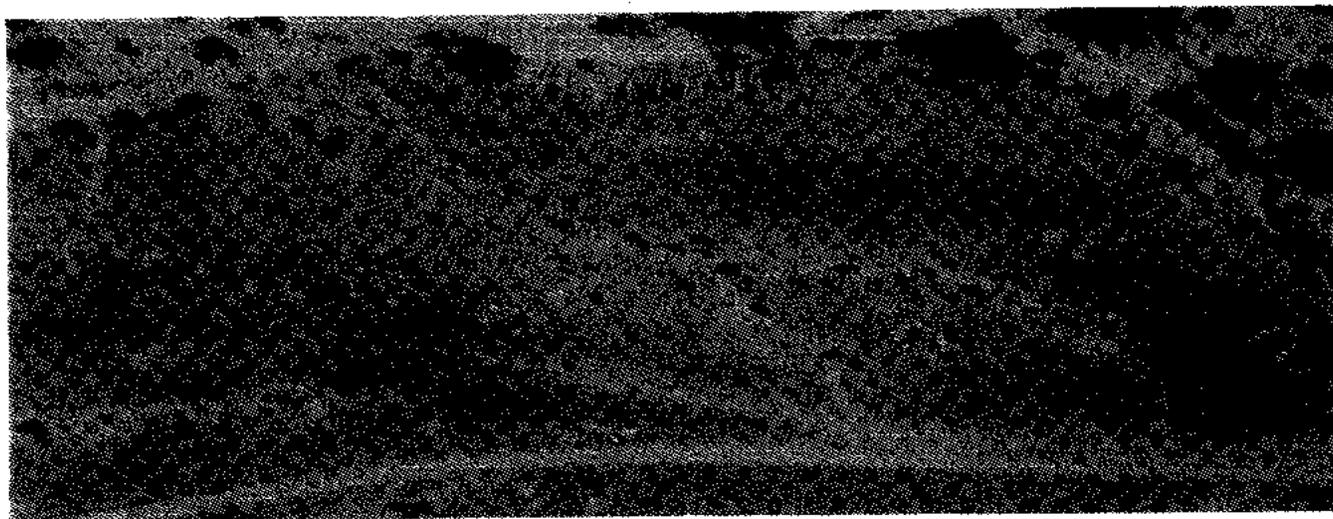


Fig. 19 Aerial Photo of Intaglios showing Reversed U Brackets



Fig. 20 Mule Mountain Intaglio Design with Straight Parallel Rows

would enhance fertility and conception). But most important of all, at a easterly location at Porterville Rocky Hill is an overhanging boulder, with cupules in the shape of a naja or reversed U bracket (Figure 22), which informants from the Tule River Indian Reservation have identified as a birthing site. So, by virtue of

association with known fertility symbols, as well as the testimony of Native American informants, the reversed U bracket or naja-shaped design was a widely accepted fertility symbol, and was used in rites associated with fertility and childbirth.

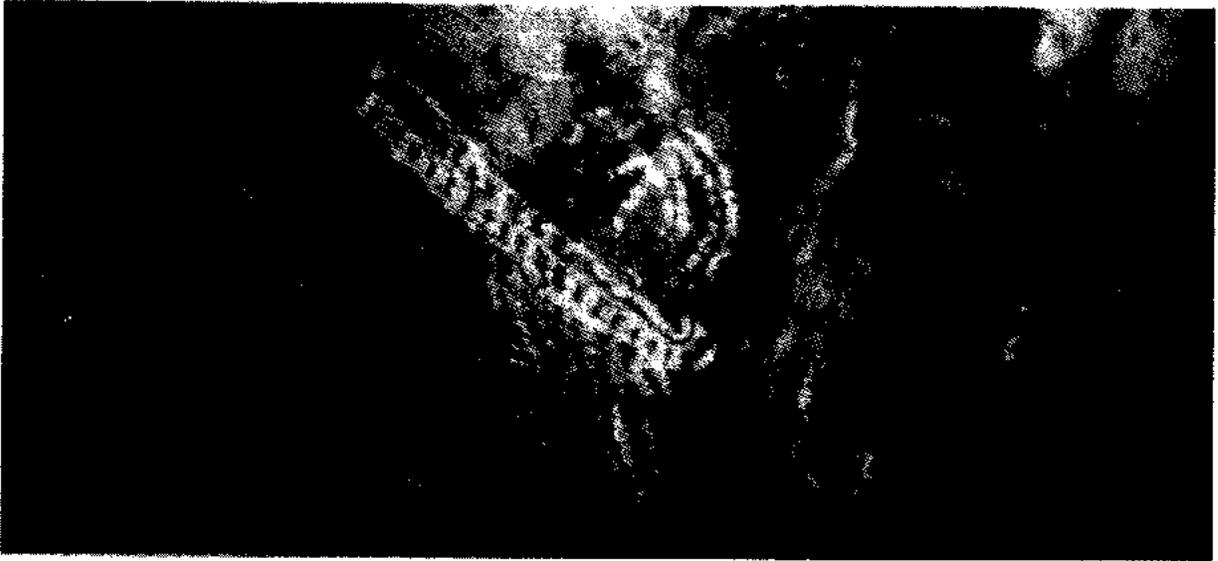


Figure 21 Porterville Rocky Hill Reversed U with vertical line.

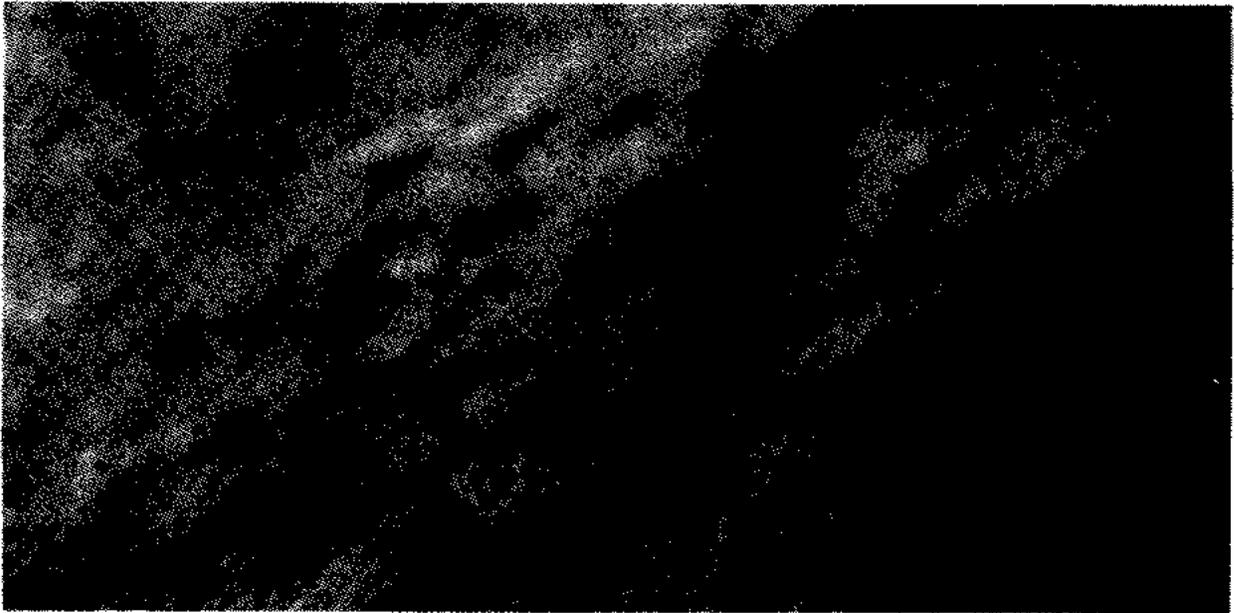


Figure 22 Porterville Cupules in Reversed U at Birthing Site “The Wicket-Shaped or Reversed U Bracket”.

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